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Claim That US Blew up Nord Stream Pipelines Relies on Anonymous Source

Seymour Hersh presents factual background material, but his case for conspiracy is held together by a seemingly omnipotent anonymous source.

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On Feb. 8, 2023, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh **published** on Substack a theoretically blockbuster revelation: A covert U.S. military operation in June 2022 was responsible for the September 2022 destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines that run natural gas from Russia to Germany. The claim has been met with skepticism by other journalists, denials from U.S. government officials, and credulous promotion in Russia.

In this article, Snopes explores the controversy, separating the factual background in Hersh's reporting that provides an air of plausibility to his blockbuster claims from the anonymously sourced assertions of a single person that hold — however weakly — those claims together. By email, we asked Hersh to respond to criticism that his article's claims are based on a single source. We also asked if any undisclosed parties verified or vetted any of that source's assertions as part of his reporting. In response, he told Snopes, "I protect my sources."

Who is Seymour Hersh?

Hersh's most **notable work** has exposed government and military abusers and cover-ups, and his past work has revealed U.S. military abuse. He uncovered the U.S. military's role in the My Lai Massacre — work that won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1970. He described the U.S.'s role in a covert bombing campaign in Cambodia. He reported on the U.S. military's mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib during the Iraq War.

His later work, however, has **been controversial** and widely **panned** by journalists for promoting conspiratorial claims that hinge on **dubious anonymous sources** or speculation.

Examples of **controversial claims** made later in Hersh's career include allegations that Turkey, not Russia, was behind a chemical weapons attack in Syria, and that Trump authorized an airstrike in Syria in response to Russia's alleged use of chemical weapons, even while knowing Russia did not use such weapons.

His work, increasingly, has become popular with Russian state-controlled media. Like the aforementioned stories, his most recent article alleging a U.S. attack on a Russian-owned pipeline has seen heavy Russian promotion, as **reported** by Insider:

In Russia, Hersh's story was immediately greeted with a sense of vindication. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told the state outlet RIA Novosti that Hersh's article was not a surprise in Moscow and said it would bring "consequences" for the US.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova seized on the article, citing the multiple times that Russia suggested the US was behind the attack, also without evidence. Russian politician Konstantin Kosachev wrote on Telegram that ... the reporting is "impossible to dismiss."

Those remarks were shared by TV personality Vladimir Solovyev, arguably Russia's leading propagandist, to his 1.3 million Telegram followers.

What Does Hersh Allege About the Nord Stream Pipeline?

Hersch's Substack post alleges that the U.S. Navy, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, conducted a covert operation using a NATO training exercise as cover to sabotage the Russian-owned Nord Stream pipelines by using explosives and a sonar-based remote detonation device:

Last June, the Navy divers, operating under the cover of a widely publicized mid-summer NATO exercise known as BALTOPS 22, planted the remotely triggered explosives that, three months later, destroyed three of the four Nord Stream pipelines ...

The story builds this argument by mixing factual background information about past covert operations and recent statements made by politicians about their disdain for the pipeline with a wildly engrossing narrative based on the often secondhand testimony of a single person Hersh describes only as "a source with direct knowledge of the operational planning."

What Are the Uncontested Facts?

Stripped of the bold claims of Hersh's single source, his report contains several factual statements or anecdotes that superficially support his narrative. There has, indeed, been bipartisan opposition to the construction of the Nord Stream pipelines, which would have transported Russian natural gas to Germany. There were concerns, prior to and directly following the Feb. 24, 2022, invasion, that such a pipeline could make German support for a unified response to Russian aggression in Ukraine harder to come by.

It's true, as well, that Operation Ivy Bell was a U.S. Navy-run covert operation against the former Soviet Union that used deep sea divers within Soviet territorial waters. It is also true that NATO held a training exercise in the Baltic sea in June 2022 that involved Navy diving units.

Finally, it is true that senior government officials in and outside the Biden administration explicitly stated their support for "ending" in some way the operation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. On Feb. 7, a week before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Biden told reporters that, "If Russia invades ... there will no longer be a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it."

Both the White House and the CIA have categorically denied Hersh's claims.

Claims All Stem From One Source

Hersh uses the testimony of one person, mixed alongside that aforementioned historical or political commentary, as evidence for every significant aspect of the alleged conspiracy. Here is the first mention of that source:

Last June, the Navy divers, operating under the cover of a widely publicized mid-summer NATO exercise known as BALTOPS 22, planted the remotely triggered explosives that, three months later, destroyed three of the four Nord Stream pipelines, **according to a source with direct knowledge of the operational planning.**

The source is first described as "a source with direct knowledge of the operational planning" and a second time as "the source with direct knowledge of the process," indicating these were the same person. All other references to a source refer, in the singular, to "the" source. This source, for example, is responsible for the claim that Biden created a task force to look into options to destroy the Nord Stream 2 pipeline:

In December of 2021, two months before the first Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, Jake Sullivan convened a meeting of a newly formed task force—men and women from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, and the State and Treasury Departments—and asked for recommendations about how to respond to Putin's impending invasion. ...

What became clear to participants, **according to the source with direct knowledge of the process**, is that Sullivan intended for the group to come up with a plan for the destruction of the two Nord Stream pipelines—and that he was delivering on the desires of the President.

The source, evidently a legal expert, is also behind the claim that Biden's actions at a news conference created some sort of loophole that allowed a covert sabotage mission to go ahead without notifying high-ranking congressional leaders:

According to the source, some of the senior officials of the CIA determined that blowing up the pipeline "no longer could be considered a covert option because the President just announced that we knew how to do it."

Under the law, **the source explained**, "There was no longer a legal requirement to report the operation to Congress. All they had to do now is just do it—but it still had to be secret. The Russians have superlative surveillance of the Baltic Sea."

This same source, evidently, is knowledgeable about internal CIA, State Department, and deep sea diver politics in addition to the specific deliberations held by a secret interagency panel. He is, in Hersh's reporting, the sole basis for claims of Norway's knowledge of and involvement in the operation:

Norway was the perfect place to base the mission. ... Norway was one of the original signatories of the NATO Treaty in 1949, in the early days of the Cold War. Today, the supreme commander of NATO is Jens Stoltenberg, a committed anti-communist, who served as Norway's prime minister for eight years before moving to his high NATO post, with American backing, in 2014.

He was a hardliner on all things Putin and Russia who had cooperated with the American intelligence community since the Vietnam War. He has been trusted completely since. "He is the glove that fits the American hand," **the source said**.

Back in Washington, planners knew they had to go to Norway. "They hated the Russians, and the Norwegian navy was full of superb sailors and divers who had generations of experience in highly profitable deep-sea oil and gas exploration," **the source said**. They also could be trusted to keep the mission secret. ...

"The best divers with deep diving qualifications are a tight community, and only the very best are recruited for the operation and told to be prepared to be summoned to the CIA in Washington," **the source said**.

The Norwegians and Americans had a location and the operatives, but there was another concern: any unusual underwater activity in the waters off Bornholm might draw the attention of the Swedish or Danish navies, which could report it. ...

The Norwegians joined the Americans in insisting that some senior officials in Denmark and Sweden had to be briefed in general terms "What they were told and what they knew were purposely different," **the source told me**. ... The Norwegians proposed [that BALTOPS 22] would be the ideal cover to plant the mines.

The only other source mentioned in Hersh's report is a retired professor with no connection to, or ability to confirm the existence of, any potential covert operation in the Baltics. His information, regarding a sonor-activated detonator, does not confirm the existence of the operation, and is speculative.

The Bottom Line

This story, when deconstructed, is merely a pile of purported second-hand information allegedly collected by someone connected in some unknown way to deliberations of a highly secret, multi-agency task force. Such a story falls prey to the same **criticisms** of other more recent work published by Hersh, which has **relied on** similarly questionable anonymous sources.

If the U.S. did conspire to destroy the Nord Stream pipeline, Hersh's reporting has not proved that case. Hersh has, instead, made a very successful blog post that essentially transcribes a compelling story someone unknown to the general public told him.

Hersch was asked by the Russian news agency TASS about the identity of his source. He **told** them that, "It's a person, who, it seems, knows a lot about what's going on."

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